The Chronicles Of Addington Peace

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THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE

I stood with my back to the fire, smoking and puzzling over it. It was worth all the headlines the newspapers had given it; there was no loophole to the mystery.

Both sides of the Atlantic knew Silas J. Ford. He had established a business reputation in America that had made him a celebrity in England from the day he stepped off the liner. Once in London his syndicates and companies and consolidations had startled the slow-moving British mind. The commercial sky of the United

HIS ATTITUDE WAS OF NERVOUS EXPECTATION

Kingdom was overshadowed by him and his schemes. The papers were full of praise and blame, of puffs and denunciations. He was a millionaire; he was on the verge of a smash that would paralyze the markets of the world. He was an abstainer, a drunkard, a gambler, a most religious man. He was a confirmed bachelor, a woman hater; his engagement was to be announced shortly. So was the gossip kept rolling with the limelight always centered upon the spot where Silas J. Ford happened to be standing.

And now he had disappeared, vanished, evaporated.

On the night of December 18, a Thursday, he had left London for Meudon hall, the fine old Hampshire mansion that he had rented from Lord Beverly. The two most trusted men in his office accompanied him. Friday morning he had spent with them; but at three o'clock the pair had returned to London, leaving their chief behind. From four to seven he had been shut up with his secretary. It was a hard time for every one, a time verging upon panic, and at such times Silas J. Ford was not an idle man.

At eight o'clock he had dined. His one recreation was music, and after the meal he had played the organ in the picture gallery for an hour. At a quarter past eleven he retired to his bedroom, dismissing Jackson, his body servant, for the night. Three-quarters of an hour later, however, Harbord, his secretary, had been called to the private telephone, for Mr. Ford had brought an extension wire from the neighboring town of Camdon. It was a London message, and so urgent that he decided to wake his chief. There was no answer to his knock, and on entering the room he found that Mr. Ford was not in bed. He was surprised, but in no way suspicious, and started to search the house. He was joined by a footman, and, a little later, by Jackson and the butler. Astonishment changed to alarm. Other servants were roused to aid in the quest. Finally, a party, provided with lanterns from the stables, commenced to examine the grounds.

Snow had fallen early in the day, covering the great lawns in front of the entrance porch with a soft white blanket, about an inch in thickness. It was the head-groom who struck the trail. Apparently Mr. Ford had walked out of the porch, and so over the drive and across the lawn towards the wall that bounded the public road. This road, which led from Meudon village to the town of Camdon, crossed the front of Meudon hall at a distance of some quarter of a mile.

There was no doubt as to the identity of the footprints, for Silas Ford affected a broad, square-toed boot, easily recognizable from its unusual impression.

They tracked him by their lanterns to the park wall, and there all trace of him disappeared. The wall was of rough stone, easily surmountable by an active man. The snow that covered the road outside had been churned into muddy paste by the traffic of the day; there were no further footprints observable.

The party returned to the house in great bewilderment. The telephone to London brought no explanation, and the following morning Mr. Harbord took the first train to town to make inquiries. For private reasons his friends did not desire publicity for the affair, and it was not until the late afternoon, when all their investigations had proved fruitless, that they communicated with Scotland Yard. When the papers went to press the whereabouts of the great Mr. Ford still remained a mystery.

In keen curiosity I set off up the stairs to Inspector Peace's room. Perhaps the little detective had later news to give me.

I found him standing with his back to the fire puffing at his cigarette with a plump solemnity. A bag, neatly strapped, lay on the rug at his feet. He nodded a welcome, watching me over his glasses.

"I expected you, Mr. Phillips," he said. "And how do you explain it?"

"A love affair or temporary insanity," I suggested vaguely.

"Surely we can combine those solutions," he smiled. "Anything else?"

"No. I came to ask your opinion."

"My mind is void of theories, Mr. Phillips, and I shall endeavor to keep it so for the present. If you wish to amuse yourself by discussing possibilities, I would suggest your consideration of the reason why, if he wanted to disappear quietly, he should leave so obvious a track through the snow of his own lawn. For myself, as I am leaving for Camdon via Waterloo station in 23 minutes, I shall hope for more definite data before night."

"Peace," I asked him eagerly, "may I come with you?"

"If you can be ready in time," he said.

It was past two o'clock when we arrived at the old town of Camdon. A carriage met us at the station. Five minutes more and we were clear of the narrow streets and climbing the first bare ridge of the downs. It was a desolate prospect enough—a bare expanse of wind-swept land that rose and fell with the sweeping regularity of the Pacific swell. Here and there a clump of ragged firs showed black against the snow. Under that gentle carpet the crisp turf of the crests and the broad plough lands of the lower ground alike lay hidden. I shivered, drawing my coat more closely about me.

It was half an hour later that we topped a swelling rise and saw the gray towers of the ancient mansion beneath us. In the shelter of the valley by the quiet river, that now lay frozen into silence, the trees had grown into splendid woodlands, circling the hall on the further side. From the broad front the white lawns crept down to the road on which we were driving. Dark masses of shrubberies and the tracery of scattered trees broke their silent levels. The park wall that fenced them from the road stood out like an ink line ruled upon paper.

"It must have been there that he disappeared," I cried, with a speculative finger.

"So I imagine," said Peace. "And if he has spent two nights on the Hampshire downs, he will be looking for a fire today. You have rather more than your fair share of the rug, Mr. Phillips, if you will excuse my mentioning it."

A man was standing on the steps of the entrance porch when we drove up. As we unrolled ourselves he stepped forward to help us. He was a thin, pale-faced fellow, with fair hair and indeterminate eyes.

"My name is Harbord," he said. "You are Inspector Addington Peace, I believe."

His hand shook as he stretched it out in a tremulous greeting. Plainly the secretary was afraid, visibly and anxiously afraid.

"Mr. Ransom, the manager of Mr. Ford's London office, is here," he continued. "He is waiting to see you in the library."

We followed him through a great hall into a room lined with books from floor to ceiling. A stout, dark man, who was pacing it like a beast in a cage, stopped at the sight of us. His face, as he turned, looked pinched and gray in the full light.

"Inspector Peace, eh?" he said. "Well, inspector, if you want a reward name it. If you want to pull the house down only say the word. But find him for us, or, by heaven, we're done."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"You can keep a secret, I suppose. Yes—it couldn't well be worse. It was a tricky time; he hid half his schemes in his own head; he never trusted even me altogether. If he were dead I could plan something, but now—"

He thumped his hand on the table and turned away to the window.

"When you last saw Mr. Ford was he in good health? Did he stand the strain?"

"Ford had no nerves. He was never better in his life."

"In these great transactions he would have his enemies. If his plans succeeded there would be many hard hit, perhaps ruined. Have you any suspicion of a man who, to save himself, might make away with Mr. Ford?"

"No," said the manager, after a moment's thought. "No, I cannot give you a single name. The players are all big men, inspector. I don't say that their consciences would stop them from trying such a trick, but it wouldn't be worth their while. They hold off when gaol is the certain punishment."

"Was this financial crisis in his own affairs generally known?"

"Certainly not."

"Who would know of it?"

"There might be a dozen men on both sides of the Atlantic who would suspect the truth. But I don't suppose that more than four people were actually in possession of the facts."

"And who would they be?"

"His two partners in America; myself and Mr. Harbord there."

Peace turned to the young man with a smile and a polite bow.

"Can you add any names to the list?" he asked.

"No," said Harbord, staring at the detective with a puzzled look, as if trying to catch the drift of his questions.

"Thank you," said the inspector; "and now, will you show me the place where this curious disappearance occurred?"

We crossed the drive, where the snow lay torn and trampled by the carriages, and so to the white, even surface of the lawn. We soon struck the trail, a confused path beaten by many footprints. Peace stooped for a moment, and then turned to the secretary with an angry glance.

"Were you with them?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then why, in the name of common sense, didn't you keep them off his tracks? You have simply trampled them out of existence, between you."

"We were in a hurry, inspector," said the secretary, meekly. "We didn't think about it."

We walked forward, following the broad trail until we came to a circular patch of trodden snow. Evidently the searchers had stopped and stood talking together. On the further side I saw the footprints of a man plainly defined. There were some half-dozen clear impressions and they ended at the base of the old wall, which was some six feet in height.

"I am glad to see that you and your friends have left me something, Mr. Harbord," said the inspector.

He stepped forward and, kneeling down, examined the nearest footprint.

"Mr. Ford dressed for dinner?" he inquired, glancing up at the secretary.

"Certainly! Why do you ask?"

"Merely that he had on heavy shooting boots when he took this evening stroll. It will be interesting to discover what clothes he wore."

The inspector walked up to the wall, moving parallel to the tracks in the snow. With a sudden spring he climbed to the top and seated himself while he stared about him. Then on his hands and knees he began to crawl forward along the coping. It was a quaint spectacle, but the extraordinary care and vigilance of the little man took the farce out of it.

Presently he stopped and looked down at us.

"Please stay where you are," he said, and disappeared on the further side.

Harbord offered me a cigarette, and we waited with due obedience till the inspector's bullet head again broke the horizon as he struggled back to his position on the coping of the wall.

He seemed in a very pleasant temper when he joined us; but he said nothing of his discoveries, and I had grown too wise to inquire. When we reached the entrance hall he asked for Jackson, the valet, and in a couple of minutes the man appeared. He was a tall, hatchet-faced fellow, very neatly dressed in black. He made a little bow, and then stood watching us in a most respectful attitude.

"A queer business this, Jackson," said Addington Peace.

"Yes, sir."

"And what is your opinion on it?"

"To be frank, sir, I thought at first that Mr. Ford had run away; but now I don't know what to make of it."

"And why should he run away?"

"I have no idea, sir; but he seemed to me rather strange in his manner yesterday."

"Have you been with him long?"

"No, sir. I was valet to the Hon. John Dorn, Lord Beverley's second son. Mr. Ford took me from Mr. Dorn at the time he rented the hall."

"I see. And now, will you your master's room. I shall see you again later, Mr. Harbord," he continued; "in the meanwhile I will leave my assistant with you.

We sat and smoked in the secretary's room. He was not much of a talker, consuming cigarette after cigarette in silence. The winter dusk had already fallen when the inspector joined us, and we retired to our rooms to prepare for dinner. I tried a word with Peace upon the staircase, but he shook his head and walked on.

The meal dragged itself to an end somehow, and we left Ransom with a second decanter of port before him. Peace slipped away again, and I consoled myself with a book in the library until half-past ten, when I walked off to bed. A servant was switching off the light in the hall when I mounted the great staircase.

My room was in the old wing at the further side of the picture gallery, and I had some difficulty in steering my way through the dark corridors. The mystery that hung over the house had shaken my nerves, and I remember that I started at every creak of a board and peered into the shadows as I passed along with heaven knows what ghostly expectations. I was glad enough to close my door upon them and see the wood fire blazing cheerfully in the open hearth.

I woke with a start that left me sitting up in bed, with my heart thumping in my ribs like a piston-rod. I am not generally a light sleeper, but that night, even while I snored, my nerves were active. Some one had tapped at my door—that was my impression.

I listened with the uncertain fear that comes to the newly waked. Then I heard it again—on the wall near my head this time. A board creaked. Some one was groping his way down the dark corridor without. Presently he stopped, and a faint line of illumination sprang out under my door. It winked, and then grew still. He had lit a candle.

Assurance came with the streak of light. What was he doing, groping in the dark, if he had a candle with him? I crept over to the door, opened it, and stared cautiously out.

About a score feet away a man was standing—a striking figure against the light he carried. His back was towards me, but I could see that his hand was shading the candle from his eyes while he stared into the shadows that clung about the further end of the corridor.

Presently he began to move forward.

The picture gallery and the body of the house lay behind me. The corridor in which he stood terminated in a window, set deep into the stone of the old walls. The man walked slowly, throwing the light to right and left. His attitude was of nervous expectation—that of a man who looked for something that he feared to see.

At the window he stopped, staring about him and listening. He examined the fastenings, and then tried a door on his right. It was locked against him. As he did so I caught his profile against the light. It was Harbord, the secretary. From where I stood he was not more than forty feet away. There was no possibility of a mistake.

As he turned to come back I retreated into my room, closed the door. The fellow was in a state of great agitation, and I could hear him muttering to himself as he walked. When he had passed by I peeped out to see him and his light dwindle, reach the corner by the picture gallery, and fade into a reflection—a darkness.

I took care to turn the key before I got back into bed.

I woke again at seven, and, hurrying on my clothes, set off to tell Peace all about it. I took him to the place, and together we examined the corridor. There were only two rooms beyond mine. The one on the left was an unoccupied bedroom; that on the right was a large storeroom, the door of which was locked. The housekeeper kept the key, we learnt upon inquiry. Whom had Harbord followed? The problem was beyond me. As for Inspector Peace, he did not indulge in verbal speculations.

It was in the central hall that we encountered the secretary on his way to the breakfast room. The man looked nervous and depressed; he nodded to us, and was passing on, when Peace stopped him.

"Good morning, Mr. Harbord," he said. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Certainly, inspector. What is it?"

"I have a favor to ask. My assistant and myself have our hands full here. If necessary could you help us by running up to London, and—"

"For the day?" he interrupted.

"No. It may be an affair of three or four days."

"Then I must refuse. I am sorry, but—"

"Don't apologize, Mr. Harbord," said the little man, cheerfully. "I shall have to find some one else—that is all."

We walked into the breakfast room and a few minutes later Ransom appeared with a great bundle of letters and telegrams in his hand.

Ransom said not a word to any of us, but dropped into a chair, tearing open the envelopes and glancing at their contents. His face grew darker as he read, and once he thumped his hand upon the table with a crash that set the china jingling.

"Well, inspector?" he said at last.

The little detective's head shook out a negative.

"Perhaps you require an incentive," he sneered. "Is it a matter of a reward?"

"No, Mr. Ransom; but it is becoming one of my personal reputation."

"Then, by thunder! you are in danger of losing it. Why don't you and your friend hustle, instead of loitering around as if you were paid by the day? I tell you, man, there are thousands—hundreds of thousands—melting, slipping through your fingers, every hour, every hour."

He sprang from his seat and started his walk again—up and down, up and down, as we had first seen him.

"Shall you be returning to London?"

At the question the manager halted in his stride, staring sharply down into the inspector's bland countenance.

"No," he said; "I shall stay here, Mr. Addington Peace, until such time as you have something definite to tell me."

"I have an inquiry to make which I would rather place in the hands of some one who has personal knowledge of Mr. Ford. Neither Mr. Harbord nor yourself desire to leave Meudon. Is there anyone else you can suggest?"

"There is Jackson—Ford's valet," said the manager, after a moment's thought. "He can go, if you think him bright enough. I'll send for him."

While the footman who answered the bell was gone upon his errand, we waited in an uneasy silence. There was the shadow of an ugly mystery upon us all. Jackson, as he entered, was the only one who seemed at his ease. He stood there—a tall figure of all the respectabilities.

"The inspector here wishes you to go to London, Jackson," said the manager. "He will explain the details. There is a fast train from Camdon at eleven."

"Certainly, sir. Do I return tonight?"

"No, Jackson," said Peace. "It will take a day or two."

The man took a couple of steps towards the door, hesitated, and then returned to his former place.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he began, addressing Ransom. "But I would rather remain at Meudon under present circumstances."

"What on earth do you mean?" thundered the manager.

"Well, sir, I was the last to see Mr. Ford. There is, at it were, a suspicion upon me. I should like to be present while the search continues, both for his sake—and my own."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," growled Ransom. "But you either do what I tell you, Jackson, or you pack your boxes and clear out. So be quick and make up your mind."

"I think you are treating me most unfairly, sir. But I cannot be persuaded out of what I know to be my duty."

"You impertinent rascal!" began the furious manager. But Peace was already on his feet with a hand outstretched.

"Perhaps, after all, I can make other arrangements, Mr. Ransom," he said. "It is natural that Jackson should consider his own reputation in this affair. That is all, Jackson; you may go now."

It was half an hour afterwards, when the end of breakfast had dispersed the party, that I spoke to Peace about it, offering to go to London myself and do my best to carry out his instructions.

"I had bad luck in my call for volunteers," he said.

"I should have thought they would have been glad enough to get the chance of work. They can find no particular amusement in loafing about the place all day."

"Doubtless they all had excellent reasons," he said with a smile. "But anyway, you cannot be spared, Mr. Phillips."

"You flatter me."

"I want you to stay in your bedroom. Write, read, do what you like, but keep your door ajar. If anyone passes down the corridor, see where he goes, only don't let him know that you are watching him if you can help it. I will take my turn at half-past one. I don't mean to starve you."

I obeyed. After all, it was, in a manner, promotion that the inspector had given me; yet it was a tedious, anxious time. No one came my way, barring a sour-looking housemaid. I tried to argue out the case, but the deeper I got the more conflicting grew my theories. I was never more glad to see a friendly face than when the little man came in upon me.

The short winter's afternoon crept on, the inspector and I taking turn and turn about in our sentry duty. Dinner time came and went. I had been off duty from nine, but at ten-thirty I poured out a whisky and soda and went back to join him. He was sitting in the middle of the room smoking a pipe in great apparent satisfaction.

"Bad time, isn't it?" I grumbled, sniffing at his strong tobacco.

"Oh, no," he said. "The fact is, we are going to sit up all night."

I threw myself on a couch by the window without reply. Perhaps I was not in the best of tempers; certainly I did not feel so.

"You insisted on coming down with me," he suggested.

"I know all about that," I told him. "I haven't complained, have I? If you want me to shut myself up for a week I'll do it; but I should prefer to have some idea of the reason why."

"I don't wish to create mysteries, Mr. Phillips," he said kindly; "but, believe me, there is nothing to be gained in vague discussions."

I knew that settled it as far as he was concerned, so I nodded my head and filled a pipe. At eleven he walked across the room and switched off the light.

"If nothing happens, you can take your turn in four hours from now," he said. "In the meanwhile get to sleep. I will keep the first watch."

I shut my eyes; but there was no rest in me that night. I lay listening to the [illegible]ce of the old house with a dull speculation. Somewhere far down in the lower floor a great gong-like [illegible]ck chimed the hours and quarters. I heard them every one from twelve to one, from one to two. Peace had stopped smoking. He sat as silent as a cat at a mousehole.

It must have been some fifteen minutes after two that I heard the faint, faint creak of a board in the corridor outside. I sat up, every nerve strung to a tense alertness. And then there came a sound I knew well, the soft drawing touch of a hand groping in the darkness as some one felt his way along the panelled walls. It passed us and was gone. Yet Peace never moved. Could he have fallen asleep? I whispered his name.

"Hush!"

The answer came to me like a gentle sigh.

One minute, two minutes more and the room sprang into sight under the glow of an electric hand-lamp. The inspector rose from his seat and slid through the door, with me upon his heels. The light he carried searched the clustered shadows; but the corridor was empty, nor was there any place where a man might hide.

"You waited too long," I whispered impatiently.

"The man is no fool, Mr. Phillips. Do you imagine that he was not listening and staring like a hunted beast. A noisy board, a stumble, or a flash of light, and we should have wasted a tiring day."

"Nevertheless he has got clear away."

"I think not."

As we crept forward I saw that a strip of the oak flooring along the walls was gray with dust. If it had been in such a neglected state in the afternoon I should surely have noticed it. In some curiosity I stooped to examine the phenomenon.

"Flour," whispered the little man, touching my shoulder.

"Flour?"

"Yes. I sprinkled it myself. Look—there is the first result."

He steadied his light as he spoke, pointing with his other hand. On the powdery surface was the half footprint of a man.

The flour did not extend more than a couple of feet from the walls, so that it was only here and there that we caught up the trail. We had passed the bedroom on the left—yet the footprints still went on; we were at the store-room door, yet they still were visible before us. There was no other egress from the corridor. The tall window at the end was, as I knew, a good twenty feet from the ground. Had this man also vanished off the earth like Silas Ford?

Suddenly the inspector stopped, grasping my arm. The light he held fell upon two footprints set close together. They were at right angles to the passage. Apparently the man had passed into the solid wall!

"Peace, what does this mean?"

You, sir, sitting peaceably at home, with a good light and an easy conscience, may think I was a timid fool; yet I was afraid—honestly and openly afraid. The little detective heard the news of it in my voice, for he gave me a reassuring pat upon the back.

"Have you ever heard of a 'priest's hole?' he whispered. "In the days when Meudon Hall was built, no country house was without its hiding-place. Protestants and priests, Royalists and Republicans, they all used the secret burrow at one time or another."

"How did he get in?"

"That is what we are here to discover; and as I have no wish to destroy Mr. Ford's old oak panels I think our simplest plan will be to wait until he comes back again."

The shadows leapt upon us as Peace extinguished the light he carried. The great window alone was luminous with the faint starlight that showed the tracery of its ancient stonework; for the rest, the darkness hedged us about in impenetrable barriers. Side by side, we stood by the wall in which we knew the secret entrance must exist.

It may have been ten minutes or more when from the distance—somewhere below our feet, or so it seemed to me—there came the faint echo of a closing door. It was only in such cold silence that we could have heard it. The time ticked on. Suddenly, upon the black of the floor, there shone a thin reflection like the slash of a sword—a reflection that grew into a broad gush of light as the sliding panel in the wall, six feet from where we stood, rose to the full opening. There followed another pause, during which I could see Peace draw himself together as if for some unusual exertion.

A shadow darkened the reflection on the floor, and a head came peering out. The light but half displayed the face, but I could see that the teeth were bare and glistening, like those of a man in some deadly expectation. The next moment he stepped across the threshold.

With a spring like the rush of a terrier, Addington Peace was upon him, driving him off his balance with the impact of the blow. One loud scream he gave that went echoing away into the distant corridors. But, before I could reach them, the little detective had him down, though he still kicked viciously until I lent a hand. The click of the handcuffs on his wrists ended the matter.

It was Ford's valet, the man Jackson.

We were not long by ourselves. I heard a quick patter of naked feet from behind us, and Harbord, the secretary, came running up, swinging a heavy stick in his hand. Ransom followed close at his heels. They both stopped at the edge of the patch of light in which we were, staring from us to the gaping hole in the wall.

"What in thunder are you about?" cried the manager.

"Finding a solution to your problem," said the little detective, getting to his feet. "Perhaps, gentlemen, you will be good enough to follow me."

He stepped through the opening in the wall, and lifted the candle which the valet had placed on the floor whilst he was raising the panel from within. By its light I could see the first steps of a flight which led down into darkness.

"We will take Jackson with us," he continued. "Keep an eye on him, Mr. Phillips, if you please."

It was a strange procession that we made. First Peace, with the candle, then Ransom, with the valet following, while I and Harbord brought up the rear. We descended some thirty steps, formed in the thickness of the wall, opened a heavy door, and so found ourselves in a narrow chamber, some twelve feet long by seven broad. Upon a mattress at the further end lay a man, gagged and bound. As the light fell upon his features Ransom sprang forward, shouting his name.

"Silas Ford, by thunder!"

With eager fingers we loosened the gag and cut the ropes that bound his wrists. He sat up, turning his long, thin face from one to the other of us as he stretched the cramp from his limbs.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said he. "Well, Ransom, how are things?"

"Bad, sir; but it's not too late."

He nodded his head, passing his hands through his hair with a quick, nervous movement.

"You've caught my clever friend, I see. Kindly go through his pockets, will you? He has something I must ask him to return to me."

We found it in Jackson's pocket-book—a cheque, antedated a week, for five thousand pounds, with a covering letter to the manager of the bank. Ford took the bit of stamped paper, twisting it to and fro in his supple fingers.

"It was smart of you, Jackson," he said, addressing the bowed figure before him. "I give you credit for the idea. To kidnap a man just as he was bringing off a big deal—well, you would have earned the money."

"But how did you get down here?" struck in the manager.

"He told me that he had discovered an old hiding-place—a 'priest's hole' he called it, and I walked into the trap as the best man may do sometimes. As we got to the bottom of that stairway he slipped a sack over my head, and had me fixed in thirty seconds. He fed me himself twice a day, standing by to see I didn't holloa. When I paid up he was to have twenty-four hours' start; then he would let you know where I was. I held out awhile, but I gave in tonight. The delay was getting too dangerous. Have you a cigarette, Harbord? Thank you. And who may you be?"

It was to the detective he spoke.

"My name is Peace, Inspector Addington Peace, from Scotland Yard."

"And I owe my rescue to you?"

The little man bowed.

"You will have no reason to regret it. And what did you think had become of me, Inspector?"

"It was the general opinion that you had taken to yourself wings, Mr. Ford."

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It was as we traveled up to town next day that Peace told me his story. I will set it down as briefly as may be.

"I soon came to the conclusion that Ford, whether dead or alive, was inside the grounds of Meudon Hall. If he had bolted, for some reason, by-the-way, which was perfectly incomprehensible, a man of his ability would not have left a broad trail across the center of his lawn for all to see. There was, moreover, no trace of him that our men could ferret out at any station within reasonable distance. A motor was possible, but there were no marks of its presence next morning in the slush of the roads. That fact I learnt from a curious groom who had aided in the search, and who, with a similar idea upon him, had carefully examined the highway at daybreak.

"When I clambered to the top of the wall I found that the snow upon the coping had been dislodged. I traced the marks, as you saw, for about a dozen yards. Where they ended I, too, dropped to the ground outside. There I made a remarkable discovery. Upon a little drift of snow that lay in the shallow ditch beneath were more footprints. But they were not those of Ford. They were the marks of long and narrow boots, and led into the road, where they were lost in the track of a flock of sheep that had been driven over it the day before.

"I took a careful measurement of those footprints. They might, of course, belong to some private investigator; but they gave me an idea. Could some man have walked across the lawn in Ford's boots, changed them to his own on the top of the wall, and so departed? Was it the desire of some one to let it be supposed that Ford had run away?

"When I examined Ford's private rooms I was even more fortunate. From the bootboy I discovered that the master had three pairs of shooting-boots. There were three pairs in the stand. Some one had made a very serious mistake. Instead of hiding the pair he had used on the lawn, he had returned them to their place. The trick was becoming evident. But where was Ford? In the house or grounds, dead or alive, but where?

"I was able, through my friend the bootboy, to examine the boots on the night of our arrival. My measurements corresponded with those that Jackson, the valet, wore. Was he

(Continued on Next Page.)